

NEW YEARS GREETINGS!

COVID 2022. I have a running debate with my wife about what we can and can't do safely. We've both gotten our shots [we really should be far beyond the point of debating this, right?]. Dinner? Must be outside. This is not negotiable in our house. Sports events? My wife went to some football games. But she says no to basketball arenas [but she lets me go...]. So we are fortunate to have our Florida "winter" - where we have more things to do outside.

Back to business. I have been notified that the Social Security Administration has reached an agreement with the administrative Law Judge's Union to re-open local hearing offices. The plan is to commence live Final Hearings beginning in May. This is critical. While the Hearing offices have conducted many thousands of hearings for benefits since the start of the pandemic, the hearings have been conducted by telephone or by video.

The hearing offices have encountered many technical difficulties along the way. Each hearing requires the participation of at least four or five parties. And I have never felt that claimants could in all cases have their claims fairly / adequately presented in this fashion. The Social Security Administration has for a decade now conducted Final Hearings through National Hearing Centers, at the option of the claimant. And while it was often possible to schedule a Final Hearing without delay with the National hearing Centers, I was never convinced that claimants could get a "full and fair" hearing when conducted remotely.

There will be some Hearing Office procedure changes to comply with health and safety protocols negotiated by Social Security. For instance, it may not be possible to utilize witness testimony at the Final Hearings, at least for the present time. But the announcement is very encouraging.

Of nearly equal importance will be the re-opening of local Social Security Offices and the encouragement of staff at payment centers to return to their centers to perform their crucial work. Absent this last step, we will still encounter delays in many of the centers' crucial functions. And I am finding that delays in Reconsideration reviews [the second step in the appeal process] are intolerable. One news source has posted a notice that our local offices will be re-opening in March. So I hope we'll get further announcements on this issue sooner than later.